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Security Council

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Provisional

5419th meeting

Monday, 24 April 2006, 10 a.m.

New York

President:	Mr. Wang Guangya	(China)
Members:	Argentina	Mr. García Moritán
	Congo	Mr. Ikouebe
	Denmark	Mr. Faaborg-Andersen
	France	Mr. Duclos
	Ghana	Nana Effah-Apenteng
	Greece	Mr. Vassilakis
	Japan	Mr. Oshima
	Peru	Mr. De Rivero
	Qatar	Mr. Al-Qahtani
	Russian Federation	Mr. Shcherbak
	Slovakia	Mr. Burian
	United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland	Mr. Johnston
	United Republic of Tanzania	Mr. Manongi
	United States of America	Ms. Wolcott Sanders

Agenda

The situation in the Middle East, including the Palestinian question

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06-32213 (E)

The meeting was called to order at 10.05 a.m.

Adoption of the agenda

The agenda was adopted.

The situation in the Middle East, including the Palestinian question

The President (*spoke in Chinese*): In accordance with the understanding reached in the Council's prior consultations, I shall take it that the Security Council agrees to extend an invitation under rule 39 of its provisional rules of procedure to Mr. Alvaro de Soto, Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process and Personal Representative of the Secretary-General.

It is so decided.

I invite Mr. De Soto to take a seat at the Council table.

The Security Council will now begin its consideration of the item on its agenda. The Council is meeting in accordance with the understanding reached in its prior consultations.

At this meeting, the Security Council will hear a briefing by Mr. Alvaro de Soto, Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process and Personal Representative of the Secretary-General. I now give him the floor.

Mr. De Soto: We are witnessing a potentially dangerous deterioration of the situation in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In the light of the failure of the new Palestinian Government to commit to the principles articulated by the Quartet related to non-violence, recognition of the State of Israel's right to exist and acceptance of previous commitments and obligations, several key donors have withdrawn direct support to the Palestinian Authority, while expressing a desire to meet basic needs of the Palestinian people. Other donors have indicated a willingness to provide funds, and efforts to obtain support continue within the region. The new Government is experiencing grave difficulties in meeting the running costs of the Government, including the payment of salaries of civil servants, security forces among them.

Lawlessness, already endemic, is worsening amid certainties concerning command and control of the security forces within the new dispensation and signs of a struggle, still unresolved, between the presidency and the new Government.

President Abbas has made important security appointments and decisions in the past few weeks. For his part, the Palestinian Interior Minister recently announced the formation of a new "special force" within the Ministry of Interior, with members drawn from existing security services and various factions, with the aim to "end the security chaos and illegal activity in the Palestinian territory". He announced the appointment to a senior or supervisory position in the Ministry of a leader of the Popular Resistance Committees who is on Israel's wanted list. President Abbas has issued a presidential order cancelling that appointment.

The head of Hamas's political bureau publicly claimed over the weekend, in Damascus, that senior Fatah officials were "conspiring" to deprive Hamas of its ability to govern, as part of a "plot" to overthrow the Government.

Senior Fatah members strongly criticized these statements and rejected the allegations, accusing the Hamas leader of inciting civil war. After protest marches and clashes between Fatah and Hamas supporters over the weekend, efforts are under way to ease tensions between the Hamas-led Government and Fatah. We shall be keeping a close watch on the evolution of the novel, ongoing Palestinian experiment in cohabitation. The political strife, non-payment of salaries, military pressure and closure make for a potent and volatile brew.

On the Israeli side, negotiations on the formation of a new Cabinet continue, with a Cabinet expected to be finalized in the very near future. Coalition talks are based on the programme outlined in interim Prime Minister Olmert's speech on election night, indicating a determination to move to set the permanent borders of Israel by removing settlements east of the barrier, consolidating the large existing settlement blocs and linking Jerusalem to Ma'ale Adumim.

The Israeli caretaker Cabinet decided on 11 April that the Palestinian Authority had become a "terrorist entity". Among other measures, Israel has stated that it will not receive on the same visit foreign visitors who met with the new Government or Hamas members.

Regarding security concerns, there has been an alarming increase in violence since 30 March. At least

29 Palestinians have been killed, among them at least six children; 180 Palestinians have been injured. During the same period, 10 Israelis have been killed, among them one child, and many have been injured during the reporting period. Three foreigners were killed in the suicide bombing in Tel Aviv.

The Israeli fatalities were the consequence of two suicide bombings, one outside the settlement of Kedumim in the northern West Bank on 30 March, the other in central Tel Aviv on 17 April. The Al-Asqa Martyrs Brigade claimed responsibility for the first attack, Islamic Jihad for the second.

President Abbas condemned both attacks, while urging the Quartet to intervene to prevent a grave deterioration in the security situation. However, no condemnation was forthcoming from the Hamas-led Palestinian Government, and Palestinian Cabinet ministers and spokesmen referred to the attack as legitimate resistance, as self-defence or as the natural consequence of Israeli aggression and occupation. The Government of Israel held the Palestinian Authority responsible for the Tel Aviv suicide bombing. Israel tightened security in the West Bank, carried out a number of arrests and moved to revoke the Jerusalem residency rights of three Hamas members of the Palestinian Legislative Council.

The Palestinian fatalities and injuries were the consequence of a range of Israeli military operations, including air strikes, artillery and tank shelling in northern Gaza, targeted killings and ground operations in the West Bank. Those targeted during the month were alleged by Israel to be militants. However, among those killed in these operations were at least three children and a Palestinian police officer. According to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), the Israeli military fired 2,415 artillery shells and 62 missiles inside the Gaza Strip during the first two weeks of April. In addition to causing human casualties, the shelling caused damage to structures and roads, left unexploded ordnance that poses a danger to civilians and created constant noise that caused stress to the civilian population in Gaza.

The Israeli Government has expressed regret at the civilian deaths. But it has indicated its intention to intensify operations unless action is taken to prevent Palestinian attacks. Israel has stated that its actions were in response to planned terrorist attacks as well as to Palestinian rocket fire into Israel from Gaza. During the reporting period, at least 113 rockets were fired towards Israel, according to OCHA. There were fortunately no injuries or significant damages reported.

The Palestinian Authority is facing a growing fiscal crisis, due to a complex combination of factors. The Authority's revenues are falling sharply mainly for three reasons. First, key donors have discontinued direct support, in view of the Government's failure to meet Quartet principles. While other donors have said that they would provide budgetary support to meet immediate needs, no support has yet been confirmed as received. Secondly, Israel continues to withhold tax clearance revenues that it collects on behalf of the Palestinian Authority, citing the Palestinian Government's policy positions. Israel has, however, announced that it will use a portion of this money to pay electricity, water and fuel bills owed to Israeli companies by the Palestinian Authority. Thirdly, contraction of economic activity is expected to reduce Palestinian domestic tax revenues.

A crisis in the banking system has compounded these acute problems. The crisis has arisen because private banks are wary of the political risks of financial transactions in the occupied Palestinian territory in the present circumstances.

We should not forget that even before the January election, the Palestinian Authority was facing fiscal difficulties as a result of the high wage bill, which had been expanded to unsustainable levels by the Palestinian Authority prior to the assumption of power by the new Government.

The Palestinian Authority has to date not paid March salaries to more than 150,000 civil servants, of whom some 70,000 are members of the security forces. As a result, there is potential for a deterioration in the security environment. Already, members of the security services have vented their anger at the prospect of non-payment of salaries by taking over government buildings. There have been protest demonstrations, many of them at the United Nations Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process office in Gaza, against the decision to withdraw funding and against Israeli military operations. United Nations security officials expect these demonstrations to increase.

There is also a clear potential for a deterioration in the humanitarian situation, which could be preceded

or even triggered by the worsening security crisis. Nearly one million Palestinians rely on a Palestinian Authority wage earner and Palestinian Authority salaries account for about 25 per cent of gross domestic product. The fiscal crisis could therefore lead to rising unemployment and soaring poverty rates.

Most important, without additional revenues, the Palestinian Authority may not be able to deliver the basic services needed to sustain Palestinians and stave off a humanitarian crisis: health care, sanitation and maintenance of sewage, electricity and water networks. The education of young Palestinians is also likely to suffer if the current trend continues, given that 95 per cent of secondary school education is provided by Palestinian Authority-salaried teachers.

I would like to add a word here about closures and barrier construction. Closures are the main factor leading to the depression of the Palestinian economy, and it had been hoped that the implementation of the Agreement on Movement and Access of 15 November 2005 would pave the way to economic revival. It is important for all concerned to alleviate the humanitarian situation; Israel's responsibilities in this regard under international law are well established. The Council will recall that the Movement and Access Agreement was the result of months of painstaking efforts by Quartet Special Envoy James Wolfensohn and a last-minute intercession by United States Secretary of State Rice. Of the six parts of that Agreement, only the Rafah crossing for persons at the southern border of Gaza is operating satisfactorily, monitored by the European Union Border Assistance Mission. President Abbas recently moved to ensure that border security falls under the authority of the presidency.

The Karni crossing — another aspect of the Movement and Access Agreement — reopened this month, but only for a limited number of days. That has somewhat eased the crisis that had developed in Gaza. The daily average number of trucks exporting goods out of Gaza through Karni between 1 and 14 April was seven, as compared with the target of 150 envisaged in last November's Agreement. Stocks of staple foodstuffs would be quickly depleted again if Karni were to be closed. However, Kerem Shalom has been opened for the import of essential food commodities from Egypt; of course, no goods are exported through Kerem Shalom.

In the West Bank, there were 476 checkpoints at last count. In the aftermath of last week's suicide bombing in Tel Aviv, existing measures to divide the West Bank into distinct areas have been solidified.

The Israeli Cabinet also decided to accelerate the pace of construction of the barrier in and around Jerusalem, notwithstanding the advisory opinion of the International Court of Justice. The Israeli High Court of Justice recently rejected a petition against the construction of the barrier in northern Jerusalem.

Let me turn briefly to developments in Lebanon, about which the Council heard from Prime Minister Siniora at the end of last week (see S/PV.5417). The fifth round of the national dialogue took place on 3 April to discuss the question of the presidency. Participants in the dialogue will seek to achieve an agreement on this issue by 28 April, when the dialogue next convenes. If no agreement is possible, the issue will be removed from the agenda, and participants will turn their attention to Hizbollah's weapons.

As reported in the previous briefing to the Council, and as Prime Minister Siniora said in his address to the Council on 21 April, Lebanese leaders reached agreement on a number of important issues. We encourage Lebanon's friends and neighbours to support it in the implementation of those nationally endorsed decisions.

We also welcome and encourage Lebanon's economic and social reform efforts and its determination to address the challenging but essential task of ameliorating its economic performance and alleviating its debt burden.

Southern Lebanon has been tense but, on the whole, quiet. We welcome the significant reduction in Israeli overflights north of the Blue Line during the reporting period and hope that further efforts will be made to cease such air violations. As regional tensions continue to rise, all parties must exercise maximum restraint and show full respect for the Blue Line in order to maintain the relative calm that currently exists and that all sides state they seek.

I would add that on 13 April, Lebanon marked the thirty-first anniversary of the start of its long and destructive civil war. It is fitting that Lebanese leaders came together on that day to renew their determination to avoid a return to violence and to recommit themselves to addressing issues of national concern

through dialogue. We continue to support the Lebanese in their attempts to reach consensus through such means and to implement the decisions reached in the national dialogue.

In closing, allow me to return briefly to the situation in Israel and the occupied Palestinian territory, where the security, humanitarian and political challenges are growing.

The first challenge is to stabilize the security environment. Here, the primary responsibility rests squarely with the parties. I take this opportunity to reiterate the Secretary-General's condemnation of last week's suicide attack against civilians in Tel Aviv and his call on the Palestinian Authority to take a clear public stand against such acts of terrorism, which cannot be justified under any circumstances. The responsible authorities must take firm measures to prevent such attacks, as well as rocket attacks. The ongoing jockeying concerning the Palestinian security forces introduces an element of uncertainty as to the precise locus of responsibility for law and order within the Palestinian Authority. There is an immediate need for closer coordination among the various security bodies.

The Secretary-General has called on the Government of Israel to ensure that its military actions are proportionate and that they do not endanger the civilian population. Both parties must abide by their obligations under international law and refrain from actions that further escalate the situation and put civilians at risk.

The second challenge is to meet the basic needs of the Palestinian people. The United Nations carries out a wide range of activities throughout the occupied Palestinian territory. In the light of current developments, it is likely that the scale of those activities will increase. United Nations entities will continue to discharge their responsibilities, to the best of their abilities, in keeping with their respective mandates. In so doing, United Nations programmes and agencies will continue to interact with their Palestinian Authority counterparts to ensure that we serve the interests of peace and meet the needs of the Palestinian people as effectively as possible. Political and diplomatic contacts may take place at the discretion of the Secretary-General.

Increased United Nations and non-governmental organization activity cannot, however, fill the void that would be created were the Palestinian Authority no longer able to provide the vital services that it delivers now. Many major donors will not transfer funds to the Palestinian Authority but express their desire to ensure that the basic needs of the Palestinian people are met. However, the Palestinian Authority provides the bulk of the irreplaceable basic services necessary to avert a humanitarian crisis, and it is highly questionable as to whether the Palestinian Authority should be supplanted in those functions. Most Palestinians, for instance, receive their medical attention from Palestinian Authority-salaried nurses and doctors in Palestinian Authority hospitals and medical centres. The United Nations will continue to work with all concerned to try to find ways to ensure that the needs of the Palestinians are met.

The third challenge is to address the new reality that both parties are on quite different trajectories from those they were on when the road map was drawn up by the Quartet and endorsed by the Security Council. Much has happened on the ground in the meantime. It is no exaggeration to say that prospects for achieving a two-State solution along the lines envisaged in the road map have receded through a combination of factors. Those include the radical departure of the new Palestinian Government from tenets long accepted by the Palestine Liberation Organization on behalf of the Palestinian people and its failure to meet the principles articulated by the Quartet. On the Israeli side, we continue to witness the creation of facts on the ground, including settlement expansion and a route of the barrier which deviates from the 1967 borders, raising serious concerns about whether it will ever be possible to achieve a viable and contiguous Palestinian State.

We must deal with the new situation with the right mixture of firm adherence to basic principles and creativity to meet a rapidly evolving reality. The Secretary-General has invited Quartet principals to meet in New York on 9 May to discuss those important issues. They will be joined by key regional partners. We will, as always, keep the Security Council informed.

The President (*spoke in Chinese*): I thank Mr. De Soto for his briefing.

The Security Council has thus concluded the present stage of its consideration of the item on its agenda. I would like to invite Council members to proceed to the consultations room to continue our discussion of the item.

The meeting rose at 10.35 a.m.